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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001120

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION MOUNTS IMPRESSIVE PROTEST AGAINST
EDUCATION LAW, CHAVEZ ATTACKS US

REF: CARACAS 001086

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FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶11. (C) Summary: The August 22 march against the National Assembly's passage the week prior of the controversial Education Law (reftel) appeared larger than any opposition protest in at least a year, a surprising accomplishment given that many Venezuelans -- particularly students -- are on their summer vacations and the political opposition remains fractured and poorly-organized. Clashes between opposition protesters and state security officials have received international media attention. Opposition leaders have called for an investigation into the unprovoked "disproportionate" response of the metropolitan police and National Guard, who repeatedly repulsed the peaceful marchers with tear gas -- apparently with little provocation. The Attorney General, meanwhile, has commissioned two state officials to investigate alleged "disruptions of public order" committed by opposition marchers. Typically, the press covered the march and United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)-sponsored counter-protest according to their respective political orientations. The international media, however, appeared to focus largely on the confrontation between the police and opposition marchers. The following day, President Chavez lauded his security forces for a job well done, and lampooned the opposition marchers for being in cahoots with unnamed US elements seeking to overthrow his government. End Summary.

VENEZUELAN TAKE TO THE STREETS, PEACEFULLY

¶12. (SBU) The opposition march against the Education Law, passed the week prior, was larger than many expected particularly considering its timing. Many of our contacts assessed that Chavez had sought to pass the law when students and many Venezuelans were on their summer vacations to prevent a large public backlash against the legislation. Media commentators noted that it took well over an hour for the swell of protesters to pass any given point, and video footage of the marchers showed the crowds completely filling the multi-lane Libertador Avenue for at least a mile -- as far as the camera could pan out. Leaders from all the major opposition political parties were interviewed before and during the march, although much of their commentary focused on Minister of Justice Tarek El-Aissami's decision to change the protest route to end short of the National Assembly, rather than on the law itself. There were some student

activists in the crowds, but they did not have the massive representation of previous marches.

13. (SBU) In contrast, the government-sponsored demonstration in support of the Education Law and in protest of the US-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement appeared to be relatively poorly attended. State-owned TV did not provide aerial shots, suggesting that they did not want to show the small size of the crowds. Venezolana TV provided coast to coast coverage of PSUV-organized "peace and education" festivals in Cojedes, Trujillo, Merida, Tachira, and Zulia States. Participation outside of the capital appeared to range from a few hundred to as little as two dozen. Speakers, particularly those on the border with Colombia, repeated Chavez's rhetoric that there was an "imperialist conspiracy" against the Bolivarian revolution and that the Education Law is "humanistic and full of love." During these interviews, the crawl at the bottom of the TV screen showed messages including "the majority support the education law" and the slogan "we are the majority, we are joy."

CARACAS MARCHERS REPELLED BY POLICE

14. (SBU) Despite a peaceful and orderly march, the opposition protest was almost immediately repelled by several waves of tear gas after they reached the barricades that marked the end of the government-approved route. Live video footage from opposition-oriented Globovision TV showed that a small portion of one of the barricades had fallen or been knocked over, but there was no indication that any of the marchers had intentionally tried to cross over or rush the rows of metropolitan police and National Guard set up behind

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the barricades. Media photos of the event show marchers near the fallen barricade covering their faces with cloth against the tear gas and holding up their hands in a show of passivity. State-owned Venezolana TV showed alleged arms that had been taken from an opposition protesters as evidence of the violent intent of the marchers.

15. (SBU) The following day, opposition marchers went to the Attorney General's office to call for an investigation into the police response. Brave People's Alliance (ABP) representative Oscar Perez called the actions by the police and National Guard "disproportionate" and said that they had acted "before people tried to break the police fence. You can see that clearly in the media videos." The opposition also called for an investigation into National Guard Colonel Antonio Benavides Torres, who had been interviewed accusing the opposition of promoting an agenda of violence. The GBRV, in return, announced that opposition marchers had provoked a police response by throwing rocks at them. Benavides alleged that the protesters had come prepared to provoke violence and showed a metal bar and brass knuckles purportedly taken from a protester as evidence of this intent.

GBRV RESPONDS

16. (SBU) In his weekly Sunday "Hello, President" TV and radio broadcast, Chavez attacked the opposition as "squalid" marchers and claimed that the United States had helped engineer the protest. He congratulated Benavides and the National Guard for its "good performance," and said that "demons appeared" during the march. Chavez contended that the opposition protesters "are excited because they say that the yanquis are coming here, the hope (of the opposition) is that the yanquis come here. So they get excited, they want to light up the streets and they want to overthrow Chavez." He called for "the people and the government to go out on a counter-attack and strike the pitiyanqui offensive" that is

being conducted under the direction of "very qualified US experts." Chavez added that "this is coming from the exterior (of the country) and with a lot of money" and he asserted that "they are trying to destabilize the country, fighting against Chavez and exploiting the faultlines of the government, amplified by the media."

17. (SBU) Minister of Public Works Diosdado Cabello took a different tack in arguing August 22 from Monagas State that the opposition "would end up embracing and defending" the Education Law. He drew a parallel to public opposition to the 1999 Constitution, which he claims everyone eventually came to accept after its passage. Cabello commented that "it will happen as it has always happened. Within three years those sectors fighting this law are going to embrace it, and they will say that it is the best law of education, just as they did with the constitution."

COMMENT

18. (C) The march represents an unusually engaged response from a public that has been largely fatalistic towards the various pieces of controversial legislation that the Chavista-dominated National Assembly has passed in recent weeks. Although the number of opposition marchers was the highest that Caracas has seen probably since the closure of Radio Caracas TV in summer 2007, its is improbable that the outcry will be enough to force Chavez to repeal the Education Law. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the continuing opposition to Chavez's acceleration of his agenda. This is also reflected in recent public opinion surveys. End Comment.

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